

Review of California History-Social Science Frameworks and Recommendations

In 2014, the California Department of Education resumed its revision of its History and Social Science Frameworks. Since then, the state's Instructional Quality Commission has reviewed thousands of public comments, and the History-Social Science subject matter committee has listened to feedback from hundreds of residents on how to improve the content.

As the Instructional Quality Commission prepares its final list of proposed edits to the draft curriculum frameworks, the revisions recommended for the Board of Education's approval in May will have significant implications for Californians. For religious, ethnic, and racial minorities, the frameworks are an opportunity to make sure their histories are represented fairly. For educators, accuracy has been a top priority. As a result, the IQC must balance cultural competency with historical accuracy.

The Hindu community has been particularly engaged on this issue over the past decade, as their calls for more accurate representations of their faith have been echoed by scholars and K-12 educators. A group of academics whose expertise is in religion and history came together with the intent of analyzing key parts of the frameworks and making recommendations to the commission to strengthen the final draft. This report is intended to guide the commission to make changes that are both historically accurate and reflective of the communities whose children attend California public schools.

This report is organized in three parts:

1. highlighting specific passages in the grade 6 and 7 narratives that have received public comment
2. providing input on why language might be problematic from both an academic and community perspective, and
3. providing specific edits recommendations to ensure that the frameworks are both accurate and culturally sensitive.

The committee of scholars in this review have expertise as curriculum reviewers, textbook authors, and academic consultants for a variety of K-12 initiatives. As such, we hope that the simplicity of our suggested edits work with the commission's goal of having an inclusive instructional paradigm without overwhelming educators.

Part I: Problematic Passages in Grade 6/Grade 7 Narratives

The grade 6 narrative has been re-worked several times since the 2009 draft, thanks in large part to the staff of the History Project at UC-Davis. Attempts were made to clarify and strengthen the narrative. It should be noted that in this regard, the narratives have significantly improved over their previous version(s), which highlights the commission's proactive approach in trying to accommodate diverse voices.

While much progress has been made, there are still some inaccuracies and oversimplifications that deserve mention. The most contentious proposed wording in the draft stem from issues about India's origins and depictions about the varna and jati social organization that eventually became called a caste system.

Beginning in Chapter 6, on page 212, line 838, the notion of religious authority is introduced.

838	Brahmins, that is, priestly families, assumed authority over complex devotional
839	rituals, but many important sages, such as Valmiki and Vyasa, were not
840	brahmins. Ancient Hindu sages (brahmins and others) expounded the idea of the
841	oneness of all living things and of Brahman as the divine principle of being. The
842	Hindu tradition is thus monistic, the idea of reality being a unitary whole.

The notion of caste is introduced in line 865.

865	As in all early civilizations, Indian society witnessed the development of a
866	system of social classes. Ancient Indian society formed into self-governing
867	groups, jatis, that emphasized birth as the defining criteria. Jatis initially shared
868	the same occupation and married only within the group. This system, often
869	termed caste, provided social stability and gave an identity to each community.
870	The Vedas also describe four main social categories, known as varnas, namely:
871	Brahmins (priests); Kshatriyas (kings and warriors); Vaishyas (merchants,
872	artisans, and farmers) and Sudras (peasants and laborers). A person belonged
873	to a particular varna by his professional excellence and his good conduct, not by
874	birth itself. In addition, by 500 CE or earlier, there existed certain communities
875	outside the jati system, the "Untouchables," who did the most unclean work, such
876	as cremation, disposal of dead animals, and sanitation.
877	Relations between classes came to be expressed in terms of ritual purity or
878	impurity, higher classes being purer than lower ones. This class system became

879	distinctive over the centuries for being especially complex and formal, involving
880	numerous customs and prohibitions on eating together and intermarrying that
881	kept social and occupational groups distinct from one another in daily life. Over
882	the centuries, the Indian social structure became more rigid, though perhaps not
883	more inflexible than the class divisions in other ancient civilizations. When
884	Europeans began to visit India in modern times, they used the word “caste” to
885	characterize the social system because of the sharp separation they perceived
886	between groups who did not intermarry and thus did not mix with each other.
887	Caste, however, is a term that social scientists use to describe any particularly
888	unbending social structure, for example, slave-holding society in the American
889	south before the Civil War, which can make the “caste” label offensive. Today
890	many Hindus, in India and in the United States, do not identify themselves as
891	belonging to a caste. Teachers should make clear to students that this was a
892	social and cultural structure rather than a religious belief. As in Mesopotamia and
893	Egypt, priests, rulers, and other elites used religion to justify the social hierarchy.
894	Although ancient India was a patriarchy, women had a right to their personal
895	wealth, especially jewelry, gold, and silver, but fewer property rights than men.
896	They participated equally with their husbands in religious ceremonies and festival
897	celebrations. Hinduism is the only major religion in which God is worshipped in
898	female as well as male form.

In Chapter 11 (grade 7), most of the public comment appeared to be in reference to Hinduism’s implied social hierarchy on page 307, in lines 1549-1554:

1549	A new world religion, Sikhism, was founded in 1469 in South Asia. Sikhism
1550	was founded by Guru Nanak, a social reformer who challenged the authority of
1551	the Brahmins and the caste order. Students learn about the Sikh Scripture (Guru
1552	Granth Sahib), articles of faith, the turban, and Sikh history. Guru Nanak taught
1553	that all human beings are equal and can realize the divine within them without
1554	any human intermediaries or priests.

Part II: Challenges with Existing Language

The chapter 10 (grade 6) draft narrative's improvement from the previous drafts included a more nuanced description of varnas and jatis, and a better understanding of how they evolved. However, the narrative - perhaps due to combining previous versions - seems contradictory in some areas while re-affirming some outdated assumptions in others. For example in, line 819, the idea of Brahmin authority seems to comport with the notion of Brahmanism, an inaccurate term that arose from 19th century European claims that Brahmins somehow controlled all aspects of Indian religious tradition. Those claims are undercut by scholars such as Adluri and Bagchee (2014), who note that European Indologists were deeply suspicious of Brahmins and viewed them in the same lens as they viewed Jews. Their anti-Semitism often crept into their analyses of ancient Indian texts such as the *Mahabharata*. "Their Brahmins were creatures of their own imagination, caricatures of rabbis drawn with brown chalk" (Adluri & Bagchee, 2014: 306).

Given this context, it is problematic to argue that "Brahmins...assumed authority over complex rituals" in lines 838-39 because such a claim is neither historically accurate nor comporting with the actual development of Hinduism from the Vedic age into the common era. Also, conflating Brahmins and sages is problematic given that they are not interchangeable terms and roles. While Brahmins did indeed gain cultural, social and political capital in the early common era and in the middle ages, they were not exclusively tasked with performing rituals.

Further in the chapter, the idea of social hierarchy emerges, but its introduction and explanation are both confusing and contradictory. Immediately after the explanation of varnas and jatis, the mention of Untouchables in line 875 seems out of place and almost forced into the narrative. While the notion of untouchability is important to address, the way the current line is phrased is de-contextualized and ahistorical. The idea of Untouchability did not emerge until the Common Era, and practices of rigid hierarchy did not emerge until close to the Middle Ages. The way the wording is currently phrased wrongly implies that it was a part of ancient India.

As such, the idea of including ritual purity seems to be unnecessary, given that social interactions among and within jati communities were complex and varied significantly across India among different religious groups. Even the term ritual purity is greatly oversimplified, and not always linked with social class or social hierarchy. Further, there is no explanation or context of how jatis became ossified and hierarchical. Given that these frameworks are for sixth grade teachers, perhaps this entire passage should remove the idea of ritual purity and social hierarchies altogether to increase clarity.

With that, perhaps the most controversial language in the chapter is the parallel between caste and slavery in lines 887-89. While the writer of this passage seems to have good intentions, there is no historical similarity between the varna/jati systems and slavery, and even an attempt to explain this sort of social structure needs to be clear and contextualized. The mention of slave-holding society as being tantamount to a caste system is factually incorrect and contradicts

historical consensus¹ while conflating forced bondage, systematic disenfranchisement and oppression with an Indian social practice that evolved over thousands of years. This sentence is probably best omitted so as to not confuse teachers between slavery - and the practice of selling and owning human beings - and an Indian social practice that became rigid and hierarchical, but never reached the abject dehumanization of slavery. The comparison between Indian society - particularly the social groupings of Hindus - with Mesopotamia and Egypt is also ill-fitting, given that priests in India did not occupy the same political space as their counterparts. Again, this comparison seems forced into the narrative, and has very little reason for remaining.

While caste is mentioned significantly, the idea of patriarchy - common in every civilization from ancient times to the modern era - is introduced without any context or rationale in line 894. If gender relations were the point, then it might be more useful to have a separate section on patriarchy and women's access across societies, rather than singling out Indian civilization as patriarchal. Moreover, the current line contradicts itself by noting that while India was a patriarchy, women enjoyed broad political, social, and religious rights. If this is the case, what is the rationale for labeling ancient Indian society a patriarchy? The concern here is that some of India's contemporary social and political issues are being projected to an era in which they either were not applicable or defined as clearly as they are today.

Finally, in chapter 11 (grade 7), the idea of Brahmin authority is introduced in lines 1549-1550 as a way of introducing the Sikh movement to the frameworks language. While numerous scholars have noted that Guru Nanak was a prominent social reformer and challenged caste orthodoxies, the claim of uniform Brahmin authority, specifically in Punjab, is highly debatable because of the prominence of the Bhakti movement in that region. In other words, Guru Nanak was challenging the same social orthodoxies as Muslim and Hindu reformers of that period, but his attempts to create an individualized way of practicing one's spirituality was embraced widely by landless agrarian communities across Punjab. Sikhism arose as a tradition that challenged social and political norms of that time, but it would be a great oversimplification - and an inaccurate one - to claim its basis as a challenge to Brahmanical authority in a region where such authority was neither uniform nor widespread. Simply removing "authority of the Brahmins" would be an accurate and more culturally competent way of phrasing this language.

Part III: Suggested Language/Edits

Given the aforementioned context, as well as the need for the Instructional Quality Commission to keep the writing succinct, we submit the following proposals on the specific lines:

Beginning in lines 838:

¹ See A. Sharma, "The Purusasukta: Its relation to the caste system"; S.M. Channa, "Caste, 'Jati' and Ethnicity—Some Reflections Based on a Case Study of the Dhobi"; and "R. Hardgrave, Caste: Fission and Fusion."

838	Brahmins, that is, priestly families, assumed authority over complex devotional
839	rituals, but many important sages, such as Valmiki and Vyasa, were not
840	brahmins. Ancient Hindu sages (brahmins and others) expounded the idea of the
841	oneness of all living things and of Brahman as the divine principle of being. The
842	Hindu tradition is thus monistic, the idea of reality being a unitary whole.

The proposed change would not significantly change the intent of the language, and would be more accurate to fit the description of Hindu practice during that time period.

Beginning in line 865, we propose minor modifications to the language for clarity and cultural competency.

865	As in all early civilizations, Indian society witnessed the development of a
866	system of social classes. Ancient Indian society formed into self-governing
867	groups, jatis, that emphasized birth as the one of the defining criteria. Jatis initially shared
868	the same occupation and married only within the group. This system, often
869	termed caste , provided social stability and gave an identity to each community.
870	The Vedas also describe four main social categories, known as varnas, namely:
871	Brahmins (priests); Kshatriyas (kings and warriors); Vaishyas (merchants,
872	artisans, and farmers) and Sudras (peasants and laborers). A person belonged was to contribute to society through
873	to a particular varna by his professional excellence and his good conduct, not by
874	birth itself. In addition, by 500 CE or earlier, there existed certain communities
875	outside the jati system, the “Untouchables,” who did the most unclean work, such
876	as cremation, disposal of dead animals, and sanitation.
877	The jatis became more complex and formal over many centuries, and socially
878	became more hierarchical.
879	distinctive over the centuries for being especially complex and formal, involving
880	numerous customs and prohibitions on eating together and intermarrying that
881	kept social and occupational groups distinct from one another in daily life. Over
882	the centuries, the By the middle ages , Indian social structure became more rigid, though perhaps not more inflexible than the class divisions in other ancient civilizations.

883	When Europeans began to visit and colonize India in modern times, they used the word
884	“caste” to characterize the social system because of the sharp separation they perceived
885	between groups who did not intermarry and thus did not mix with each other.
886	Caste, however, is a term that social scientists use to describe any particularly
887	unbending social structure, for example, slave-holding society in the American
888	south before the Civil War, which can make the “caste” label offensive.
889	Today many Hindus, in India and in the United States, do not identify themselves as
890	belonging to a caste.
891	Teachers should make clear to students that this was a social and cultural structure tied to
892	jatis rather than a religious belief. As in Mesopotamia and
893	Egypt, priests, rulers, and other elites used religion to justify the social hierarchy.
894	Although ancient India was a patriarchy, w Women had a right to their personal
895	wealth, especially jewelry, gold, and silver, but fewer property rights than men.
896	They participated equally with their husbands in religious ceremonies and festival
897	celebrations. Hinduism is the only major religion in which God is worshipped in
898	female as well as male form.

These edits would provide clarity and keep the majority of the language regarding India’s social development.

Finally, our proposed wording in the grade 7 narrative, line 1549, was explained in the previous section.

1549	A new world religion, Sikhism, was founded in 1469 in South Asia. Sikhism
1550	was founded by Guru Nanak, a social reformer who challenged the authority of
1551	the Brahmins and the caste order social orthodoxies . Students learn about the Sikh
1552	Scripture (Guru Granth Sahib), articles of faith, the turban, and Sikh history. Guru Nanak taught
1553	that all human beings are equal and can realize the divine within them without
1554	any human intermediaries or priests.

This proposed edit keeps lines 1549-1554 almost entirely intact and preserves the intent of the language regarding Sikhism.

In sum, these suggested revisions do not encumber the IQC with major changes. Instead, they streamline the frameworks language; make the narratives more accurate and culturally competent; and remove problematic descriptions that have yet to be addressed since the revision process began.

It is the hope of those involved in the creation of this report that the commissioners strongly consider these recommendations.

Sincerely,

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